

Testimonials and influencers versus activists and movements: the study case of the UN Women “He For She” campaign. How are we fostering feminism in the new millennium

In September 2014, UN Women launched the HeForShe campaign, a call to all human beings to stand together for gender equality. Starting from Emma Watson’s speech at the presentation event, followed by speeches and public acting of many other testimonials and influencers, this research paper tries to analyze the raison d’être not only of the initiative in relation to the concepts of feminism and gender equality in the second decade of the new millennium, but also the role of testimonials and influencers in promoting the message. The stereotyped image that just the name HeForShe transmits should make everybody angry: a man acting on behalf of a woman, a man deciding on behalf of a woman. It sounds like a slap in the face of feminist movements: does humanity need a new campaign to state what for many women is the daily condition? The general impression that the paper wants to underline is that the “HeforShe” message is pushing back forward all our efforts as scholars, activists, and women of the world, underlying that we live in a climate of “backlash” against women’s fights, which is more likely to succeed when it gives the impression to be not political at all.

Keywords: stereotypes; language, campaign; feminism, policies

Setting the Scene

UN Women HeForShe is an initiative in the context of rising awareness on gender equality as its mission. As stated in the website (www.heforshe.org), the goal is to invite and engage a global audience “to stand together as equal partners to craft a shared vision of a gender equal world and implement specific, locally relevant solutions for the good of all of humanity”. The campaign was created in 2014 by UN Women, the United Nations entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women, and launched at UN Headquarters in New York by the Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, endorsed by former Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon, as a “solidarity movement for gender equality [which] provides a systematic approach and targeted platform where a global audience can engage and become change agents for the achievement of gender equality in our lifetime.” A speech by British actress Emma Watson, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador and public face of the campaign, formally introduced the initiative at a dedicated event in September 2014. Watson’s speech, personal and passionate, was a formal invitation to all men and boys to participate in a conversation about gender equality. In spite of what the name may evoke, HeForShe is not a women’s cry-for-help declaration, said Watson, but rather, it addresses men and boys as both perpetrators and victims of global gender inequalities. It asks them to pull off their masks, to break free of stereotyped gender roles, and to

1 take a stand for gender equality, so to “be a more true and complete version of
2 themselves” (Watson, 2014).

3 HeForShe is articulated as a multi-level initiative. Following the launch
4 speech, a digital platform and social network accounts have been deployed,
5 which call for a broad, bottom-up participation.

6 Three months later, at the 2015 World Economic Forum in Davos, the
7 HeForShe IMPACT 10x10x10 initiative was introduced by Watson as a more
8 institutional development of the HeForShe campaign to gain further
9 momentum in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. This
10 was intend as a sort of pilot-program, a campaign accelerator, which involves
11 ten universities, ten corporate firms and ten Heads of State, called “impact
12 champions”. These champions are game-changers that share the will to make
13 bold commitments to change, as well as the actual power to do it. They
14 supposedly are a representative sample of different geographies and sectors
15 around the world. At a later stage, their efforts should be scalable to a larger
16 number of participants, globally.

17 While navigating HeForShe web pages, links to other connected initiatives
18 are highlighted. For example, a partnership with Boy Story (<https://boystory.com>),
19 seller of dolls for boys designed to teach gender equality from childhood,
20 that created of a HeForShe doll whose proceeding contribute to the HeForShe
21 initiative. Or, the Representation Project (<http://therepresentationproject.org/>)
22 and their #NotBuyingIt campaign to call out companies that use offensive
23 stereotypes to sell their products. Just to name a couple. Thus, it is clear that
24 HeForShe has been conceived as an umbrella of initiatives with women's
25 empowerment as a goal, under the bigger umbrella of UN Women.
26 Simultaneously, it also seems to act as a catalyst for other UN or UN-
27 partners' initiatives promoting gender equality—or at least it is what can be
28 inferred while navigating www.heforshe.org. Having briefly introduced the
29 initiative, aside from the obvious remark: “Who is this Harry Potter girl, and
30 what is she doing speaking at the UN?”, the real questions are: How relevant is
31 this “solidarity movement” to genders around the world? Could it really be a
32 game changing approach to reach gender equality? The next chapters will try to
33 contextualize HeForShe and highlight the key arguments for embracing or
34 rejecting this campaign.

35 36 37 **The Brand “we should all be feminists”**

38
39 Some statements:

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41 “If women are [...] full and equal partners in society, their families will flourish
42 [...] communities and nations [...] as well. That is why every woman, every man,
43 every child, every family, and every nation on this planet does have a stake in the
44 discussion.”. These word are from the Hillary Clinton's speech at the Beijing
45 conference on September 5, 1995 and Watson herself refers her in the September
46 2014 HeForShe speech.
47

1 “At some point I was a happy African feminist who does not hate men and who
2 likes lip gloss and who wears high heels for herself but not for men.”
3 (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2012 at TED in her most famous talk: “We
4 should all be feminists”).

5
6 “My mentors [...] these influences were the gender equality ambassadors [...] they are the inadvertent feminists that are changing the world today. We need
7 more of those.” (Emma Watson’s speech for HeforShe campaign, 2014)
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9

10 On January 10, 2017 Natalie Portman gives a speech on human rights at
11 the Women’s March in Los Angeles sporting the Dior “We should all be
12 feminists” tee shirt, inspired by Adichie’s talk.

13 Chimamanda Adichie’s 2012 TED Talk “We should all be feminists”
14 seems to have resuscitated the word feminist, giving it a nuance it probably
15 never had before — since she actually made it trendy, glamour, up to date for
16 the new era. The relaxed accessibility of her discourse brings to the surface the
17 doubts and skepticism of many women and men of her generation: does
18 feminism still exist? Is it still alive? Isn’t a feminist a thing of the past, a man-
19 hater, a spinster, probably lesbian, who believes that women are better than
20 men?

21 Listening to the tales of the participants to the Fourth Global Women’s
22 Conference in 1995, this was exactly the same attitude of host Chinese
23 authorities: fear of the unknown, rejection of something which seems to
24 threaten accepted moral standards and social balance. Yet, there is a crucial
25 difference between the essence of Hillary of Clinton’s 1995 discourse on
26 human rights and the feminism that Adichie is talking about in 2012 —which
27 is the same feminism Watson referred to in her speech in 2014. The Beijing
28 Conference is probably the most important gathering of women from all over
29 the world and from all walks of life. In Clinton’s words, it is a celebration “of
30 the contributions women make in every aspect of life: in the home, on the job,
31 in the community, as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, learners, workers,
32 citizens, and leaders.” (Clinton, 1995). It is the recognition of women’s
33 fundamental role in society, their non-renounceable contribution to flourishing
34 communities and nations. Hence, the fundamental right for women to fully
35 participate in the social, political, cultural, economic life of their countries.
36 Clinton mentioned that saying that “human rights are women’s rights and
37 women’s rights are human rights, once and for all” seemed quite obvious to
38 her, she was just reaffirming the universality and indivisibility of human rights
39 proclaimed in Vienna in 1993. On the contrary, it was a major political
40 statement, a very transparent naming and shaming of all different types of state
41 perpetrated —or accepted— human rights violations with women as targets,
42 and a call to action to all women to take a bold step to better their lives. In
43 1995, this unifying call to women was very much needed: a true empowerment
44 of women had to understand diversity, forego the differences and focus on the
45 commonalities, so to have a truly powerful voice.

46 In the second decade of the new millennium, this approach is having its
47 day. The Baby Boomers generation didn’t achieve gender equality, and their

1 political longevity has prevented the following generation to really make a
 2 difference in this respect. So the word feminism has been buried by the weight
 3 of its ineffectiveness, and possibly by the stigma of its “ideologization”. Yet,
 4 the culture of gender equality has penetrated some —more privileged,
 5 maybe— environments and has created what Watson calls “inadvertent
 6 feminists”: people that simply do not question the fact that biology does not
 7 determine rights and opportunities.

8 This feminism is therefore non-factional, non-confrontational, not bold,
 9 and not even necessarily public: it is an inclusive personal and intimate
 10 attitude, first and foremost. The big news, Adichie informs us, is that a feminist
 11 can be a man, and a very masculine one.

14 **We should all be Angry**

16 We should all be angry because “gender as it functions today is a grave
 17 injustice” (Adichie, 2012). We should actually be angry first because of the
 18 stereotyped image the name HeForShe transmits: it sounds exactly like the cry
 19 for help of a damsel in distress to a brave knight in a shiny armour. What about
 20 women’s empowerment? Such name neglects the difference between sex and
 21 gender: biology is not identity. Yet, HeForShe could mean something different.
 22 If “For” is used as a function word to indicate equivalence in exchange, it may
 23 actually be saying that “She” has the same value as “He”. That He and She are
 24 naturally two halves of the same whole, were not for the socio-cultural
 25 construction of gender roles for He and for She —which has afforded primacy
 26 to the male biological sex. The idea (and my idea) is that the name is a
 27 deliberate simplification to make the campaign more immediately relevant to a
 28 broader audience. By avoiding divisive and at time sterile discussions on
 29 gender theories, the initiative can focus on the fact that, after all, female or
 30 male biological sex is what the majority of people are born with. Then, taking
 31 the biological sex as a given (again, for the majority of people a binary
 32 structure may be assumed) gender roles could be torn apart and gender
 33 identities could then be mapped as a spectrum, as Watson suggests, rather than
 34 a rigid binary construct. “The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we
 35 should be rather than recognizing how we are” (Adichie, 2012). Gender as it
 36 functions today is the outcome of a predefined socialization process imposed
 37 by cultural frameworks to female and male beings since their birth. Gender
 38 today predefines the subsequent relationships between women and men, and
 39 the opportunities (or lack thereof) associated with being male and female —
 40 which leave out of the picture anything falling out of this binary structure. In
 41 this context, He is the leader, the breadwinner, the socio-economic-political-
 42 cultural holder of power. She is at the mercy of He. As it has always been, for
 43 the majority of cultures. As Adichie, HeForShe goes one step further by
 44 suggesting that we should all be angry because patriarchy-constructed gender
 45 stereotypes mortify both men and women. What if a man does not want to be
 46 the sole breadwinner? What if a man wants to raise his children? Is society

doing boys a favour when it teaches them to be always on top? In this respect, the novelty of HeForShe rests on the challenge it throws to men to openly admit that they are angry too. That they are not so comfortable in their one-size-fits-all clothes. Men and women are in the same boat, so to speak, in feeling awkward in the gender roles they are playing. Hence, a possible path for gender equality may start from the inadvertent feminists who disregard stereotyped roles built on biological roots and foster personal identities based on egalitarian values, exactly like the mentors Watson refers to.

The Key Ingredients

This section will look at some other items that define the initiative: the vision of the project, its target audience and its ambassador.

The Vision: When Colors Matter

The HeForShe logo is supposed to be the symbol of gender equality. It goes back to the traditional icons for male and female —icons that have been modified and adopted by other genders beyond binary, by the way. It intersects them and then keeps only the point where the two come together to create something new, supposedly the symbol of “our shared humanity”. The color contrast —to flip the coin, pink represents the male symbol— highlights the individuality within the unity: this is a way to say that differences are recognized and valued, but the focus rests on the common goal: equality. This does not sound different from the essence of Clinton’s call to action in 1995. Yet, while the mission is the same, the path is different. As Watson mentions in her 2014 speech, less than 30% of Clinton’s audience in Beijing were men and you cannot change the world if half of it is not involved. Patriarchal society has to empower women, but the contrary is valid as well: women should invite and engage men in the process. A change of paradigm is therefore needed, since it is insane to expect different results from doing the same thing over and over again.

The Color

The accent color, then, is not a causal choice. UN Women worked with color consulting firm Pantone Color Institute to make an informed decision about this defining element of identity. The brief was a color that could energize the campaign and work as trait d’union for the various initiatives and for the audience. The result is a bold and bright shade of magenta. Its red base supposedly symbolizes the heart —passion, excitement and confidence— whereas its pink influence adds youthfulness and freshness. According to Pantone Color Institute, the gap between men and women’s worlds has been reducing in the last years, men are getting more involved with issues traditionally associated with women. Likewise, the color pink has lost some if

its sensitive feminine connotations and hard shades of pink tend to replace red with a different, new call to arms. In the view of the Institute, this Bright Rose “walks the fine line between red and pink as well as that same fine line between male and female” (Minott, 2014): the ideal color to represent solidarity and unity. Interestingly, Clinton wore a pink suit in Beijing, she followed a friend’s advice along the lines: if you’re going to do it, do it big, don’t hide your femininity!

The Core Target: Generation Z

The campaign works at two levels simultaneously: the power holders on one level and civil society at large at the other end of the spectrum. This chapter will focus on the second. None of the generations born after the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been capable of achieving gender equality —not even close. Hence, why not engaging the new generations, since they have a lot more at stake? Generation Z, those that have 9/11 as their first memory, who grew up with economic recession and war on terror, are already more than a quarter of the global population today, and will be 33% in 2020. Their number is higher in developing countries than in the Western world. They are digital natives, truly globally connected, and they have a chance to shape their own future together. Many researches on “millennials” (Weinswig 2016; Netburn 2016) highlight that they are more conservative and careful than previous generations, less keen on drinking and sex, more compassionate, responsible and determined. They feel the need to get an education to access the job market and to change the world. They are more likely to embrace one cause, such as environment and feminism, than to follow a political party. Much of their civic engagement takes place on social media rather than through traditional political structures. Particularly relevant is a UK research published in October 2016 (NCS, 2016). A poll of 1,000 teenagers revealed that young people are typically much more open to other types of sexuality than previous generations. Data shows that gender identity is also less binary than in the past: only 63% of teens aged 16 and 17 define themselves as 100% straight (compared with 78% of adults). Generation Z doesn’t seem to cuddle the idea of people being just gay or just straight: even among LGB teens, only 11% said they consider themselves 100% gay or lesbian. Gender identities are more liquid, they evolve and move away from the strict binaries that defined male / female relations until now. These are the type of insights that give credit to UN Women’s decision to launch the HeForShe campaign. First of all, young people may not see the name as discriminatory —like older generations do. Second, gender equality is already a value for them, one they are already eager to defend. Third, digital and social engagement is their norm. Fourth, this is shared at global level. Eventually, while older generations engage with the power holders, young people pursue their personal digital mobilization.

The Ambassador

The public face of this campaign had to be someone capable of talking credibly to the young generations; passionate, intelligent and pleasant enough to stand for that new wave of feminism that both women and men may embrace; and well known globally. There could be no better choice than Emma Hermione Granger Watson. For the reasons below, at least. Emma Watson is one of them. Being the heroine of a come-to-age literary saga, she has become the inadvertent sister of many Millennials and Z-ers.

Like Hermione, Emma personifies a smart, and very real young woman. She is loved for what she thinks and does. She clearly is privileged in comparison to most young people, but she seems to have been working hard nevertheless, and the number of followers on Facebook and Instagram testify to her popularity. Emma Watson is credible. She surely is a good actress, but her 2014 speech about her personal discovery of feminism and her passionate “If not me, who? If not now, when?” really stroke quite a few chords. And she walks the talk: to learn more about the issue she is championing, she started to read books on equality and even launched a virtual feminist public book club on Goodreads called “Our Shared Shelf”: the first book mentioned on the reading list is Gloria Steinem’s *My life on the road*. Emma Watson is inspirational. She has already been of inspiration to Malala Yousafzai, Generation Z’s person of reference. Malala, so she declared, thought the word feminist was a bit “tricky”, with both positive and negative connotations, and she was not sure she could embrace it. But “then after hearing your [2014] speech I decided there’s no way and there’s nothing wrong by calling yourself a feminist. So I’m a feminist and we all should be a feminist because feminism is another word for equality.” (Yousafzai, 2015). Emma Watson is newsworthy. A widespread Italian newspaper sees Watson as a reiteration of the old stereotype of the sweet fairy, and her feminist views too similar to the patronizing approach of the old American radical feminism: a truly innovative campaign should dare and choose a less politically correct person (Eretica, 2015). This is legitimate and understandable: yet, if research on Generation Z is reliable (and most likely it is), young people look at the issue through different lenses —and probably they don’t even know American radical feminism. The key phrase is “united we stand, divided we fall”. And Watson is less divisive than many.

Results and Engagement

Some of the results of the HeforShe campaign were proudly announced by Watson, and some data is tracked on the website, so it is worth looking at it. In January 2015, Watson reported that the September 2014 launch conference was watched over 11 million times, and generated 1.2 billion social media conversations. The challenge she launched on September 20, 2014 to engage 100,000 people in the first month, was met in three days starting with Ban Ki-moon and counting Russell Crowe, Desmond Tutu, Forest Whitaker, Prince

Harry and One Direction —quite a diversified crowd (Watson, 2015). The initial response was quite warm, then, and Watson’s speech contributed since it arose the interest of a broad range of media, from institutional to lifestyle to fashion. Arguably, some of the media coverage was a parade of stereotypes about her Dior dress and her beauty with brains, but still, it got HeForShe talked about (IMediaEthics, 2014). The website, as said, is the platform where anybody can join the initiative, even by simply “committing” through registering, entering country and gender identity —a choice between female, male or other /non-binary. A higher level of engagement implies taking action on one of the six critical areas highlighted by HeForShe: actions range from sharing statements from HeForShe on one’s own social accounts to a more articulated participation. Finally, donations are very much welcomed. An engagement counter keeps track of the number of people that embraced the initiative. The first year target of reaching one billion men and boys by July 2015 was missed, then at the end of May 2017, the counter announces a total 1.3 billion actions and 1.4 million commitments, of which 79% by men and boys, 19% women and girls, and 2% “all others” (undeclared or non-binary gender identity). A map on the website then shows the level of engagement (high, medium or low) by country. The colours reveal no surprises: people from Western states are overall more engaged; Northern Europe is more engaged than Southern Europe; Muslim regions are less engaged, likewise Russia and China. Strikingly, the website is available in five languages (English, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Chinese), which only partly overlap with the official UN languages. While the absence of French might not be a major hurdle (debatable), the absence of Arabic and Russian should be challenged. Why make it harder to engage where gender equality advocacy is needed most? A closer look at each country is actually quite interesting, albeit again not surprising. Across South America, violence has been indicated as a priority issue to be addressed for gender equality, whereas for the US and Canada the field to stress is work. In Mexico the priority is trifold: education, work and violence. Chinese people see work as a priority issue; while the priority is violence in Turkey and education in India. Generally speaking, work seems to be the priority among developed countries, but in Italy and Spain violence is a major issue too. Finally, having the Head of State as impact champion does not seem to foster engagement.

Open Questions at the end

The HeForShe initiative may indeed be deemed a paradigm changing approach to gender equality. It is about solidarity; an inclusive approach after decades of confrontation. It builds on the assumption that gender stereotypes and gender segregation have created specific roles and power relations, of which not only women but also men are victims. Hence, the time has come for men and boys to come out of their role and engage to achieve equality; the time has come to become active bystanders in front of the discriminations they see around them — and on them too. HeForShe manages to involve multiple

1 stakeholders at multiple levels, including state and not state actors, globally. It
 2 actually welcomes all gender identities and all ages indistinctively, at global
 3 level. It touches upon all different sectors and aspects of everybody's daily life,
 4 and brings it all under the same umbrella. Most of all, it involves directly the
 5 new generations, the ones who may actually achieve gender equality in their
 6 lifetime. And it does it through tools that are relevant to them and truly global:
 7 the digital world, and a credible ambassador. Well then, is this the perfect
 8 recipe to reach gender equality? Hard to tell. If the premises are interesting,
 9 the challenges are important. To start, it should not be forgotten that UN
 10 initiatives are only as good as key stakeholders —governments first— make
 11 them. If those in power, the Heads of the State, the top level educators and
 12 multinational corporations or the rectors of the universities do not embrace the
 13 gender equality goal, women, girls and anybody else will hardly have a chance
 14 to be empowered in the UN perspective. This point is about shared governance,
 15 it is based on trust and solidarity. How this compares with the current global
 16 political climate of activism and grassroots' movements is open for debate.
 17 Then, a key question is how this initiative will be cascaded from the world
 18 gender equality champions to the broader global multi-polar reality of today, so
 19 it does not remain a pretty empty box. In short, how will this move on from a
 20 mere declaratory phase? How will the efforts of the Head of Iceland impact
 21 the Heads of the states that pretend that homosexuality does not exist within
 22 their state borders? What is the impact of Science Po's commitments on a
 23 small university? When will the commitments and reports be translated into
 24 ready-to-apply policies? Will HeForShe inform in any way the path to achieve
 25 Sustainable Development Goal 5, gender equality? The last, but perhaps most
 26 immediate point, is the confusion between gender equality and feminism that
 27 pervades the HeForShe initiative. Watson herself talks repeatedly about women
 28 and girls, and about her decision to be a feminist. Yet, if gender equality is the
 29 state in which access to rights or opportunities is unaffected by sex, why is the
 30 initiative still putting almost all its focus on women? Is "women" a placeholder
 31 term for discriminated gender identities in general?

32 As explained by Saltzman Chafetz and Gary Dworkin, the backlash does
 33 not always take the form of an organized movement, but that doesn't make it
 34 less effective. In fact, the absence of a clear or single scheme only makes it
 35 tougher for it to be recognizable and predictable. The authors emphasize that a
 36 backlash against women's fights is more likely to succeed when it gives the
 37 impression not to be political, so that it appears not to be a countermovement at
 38 all. It is most powerful when it hits private aspects of life, until women begin to
 39 enforce the backlash on themselves. It operates according to a subtle divide-
 40 and-conquer strategy: elevating women who follow its directions, isolating
 41 those who don't (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987: 50). It is most powerful also when
 42 it comes from the most prestigious institutions in the world, dressed like an
 43 empowerment campaign. The backlash of "he" against "she".

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